



WIKO – A DECISIVE TURNING POINT IN  
MY LIFE AND RESEARCH  
BEE YUN

---

Bee Yun specialises in the history of political thought, contemporary political theory, and the political and religious iconology of the Pre- and Early Modern Ages of the West. He received his Ph.D. with a work on the transformation of political thought in the later Middle Ages and Niccolò Machiavelli's ideological innovation at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (2009). He had taught at Humboldt-Universität and Seoul National University prior to joining Sungkyunkwan University, where he teaches political theories. He has published several articles in top-ranked domestic and international journals, such as *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, *History of Political Thought*, *Source: Notes in the History of Art*, *Viator*, *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, and *International History Review*. He also contributes domestically and internationally to daily newspapers and journals like *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel*. He published the monograph *Wege zu Machiavelli: Die Rückkehr des Politischen im Spätmittelalter* (Ways to Machiavelli: The Return of the Political in the Later Middle Ages) in 2021 (Cologne: Böhlau), which contains extensive discussions of European political thought from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, including Machiavelli's political thought. – Address: Hoam Hall 51108, Sungkyunkwan University, Jongno-Gu, Sungkyunkwan-ro 25-2, 03063 Seoul, Republic of Korea. E-mail: vitafelix@skku.edu.

During my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, I pursued my project titled “The Will to Democracy: Democracy in East Asia and a New Global History of Democracy in the 21st Century.” The project focuses on reconstructing the history of democracy's development and its global success, particularly over the last seven decades, with a comparative perspective. This approach does not overlook the challenges to democratic governance or

its moments of failure, as we currently see with the global rise of populism. Instead, the project seeks to analyse what actually drives democracy and how and why this driving force can be lost. The Wissenschaftskolleg, as a hub for scholars from diverse fields and a platform for engaging with experts beyond academia, played a pivotal role in advancing my research. It offered an ideal environment for my project, enabling numerous formal and informal discussions that significantly enriched my understanding of the subject matter.

The concept of the “will to democracy” emphasizes the importance of the voluntaristic aspect in democracy’s development. Democracy emerged because it was actively pursued, not because it was logically necessary or inherently more reasonable than other forms of governance. It is not the inevitable outcome of rational thinking or open public deliberation. The focus of my research is on four experiments with democracy: ancient Athenian democracy, often regarded as the first democracy in world history; the popular government in late medieval Florence, which, while not strictly a democracy, nonetheless exemplifies the societal forces that push toward a broader distribution of power; Weimar democracy, which vividly demonstrates both the essential conditions for democratic success and the factors leading to its crisis; and the post-World War II democracies of South Korea and Japan, considered two of the most successful realizations of the democratic political idea.

Significant progress was made in this research during my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg. My understanding of the concept of will, which serves as the cornerstone of this study, became clearer. Dialogues with Fellows, particularly philosophers, were crucial in helping me develop and refine my ideas about this concept. Additionally, my understanding of related historical experiences has deepened. Interactions with historians and legal scholars were especially beneficial in expanding my knowledge of the rise and fall of Weimar democracy in Germany. Moreover, several forums I organized with Marion Tiedtke and Barbara Prainsack, focusing on the topic of democratic crises and the challenge of populism, provided a platform for lively exchanges that greatly stimulated my research ideas. Building on the progress made so far, I now plan to write a monograph.

A significant turning point in my research occurred during my Tuesday Colloquium on January 30th (titled “The Will to Democracy: The Development of Korean Democracy and Its Implications in the Worldwide Democracy Crisis”). The presentation, along with the ensuing discussions, offered a valuable opportunity to refine my arguments. Communicating effectively with colleagues from different fields requires sharpening one’s ideas

and expressing them more precisely and accessibly. In the process of doing so, one often gains new insights, which was certainly the case for me. Additionally, the more than thirty questions I received during the presentation provided key reference points for future research. My subsequent talks and presentations on this related topic, at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg and the University of Augsburg, benefited significantly from these experiences.

Another benefit of the Wissenschaftskolleg is that it serves not only as a hub for interacting with Fellows, but also as a space for meeting and engaging with scholars from Berlin, across Germany, and beyond. At the Wissenschaftskolleg, I had the opportunity to connect with a wide range of scholars, both directly and indirectly related to my discipline, which provided me with significant inspiration and valuable feedback on a variety of topics. Additionally, the Wissenschaftskolleg allowed me to broaden my outlook by engaging with colleagues outside my usual humanistic and social science boundaries, such as natural scientists, as well as professionals from outside the academic sphere, including photo essayists, novelists, filmmakers, and musicians.

It is also worth mentioning that the Wissenschaftskolleg's influence extends beyond its physical space. It constantly hosts a diverse group of professionals not only from academia, but also from the media and the arts. These interactions have enriched my research on democracy. For instance, my article published in *Der Spiegel* (July 8), which reflected on the cases of Germany and South Korea in responding to the challenges of populism, is one of many outcomes of these exchanges.

In this context, I must also mention my lecture on Niccolò Machiavelli's political thought, delivered at the Einstein Hall at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities on May 27th. The stimulating discussions I had before and after the lecture with the Fellows in attendance helped advance my ideas on the topic, leading to new research concepts regarding the development of political thought in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Personally, my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg, with all the connections I made, significantly broadened my perspective on life and work. The Wissenschaftskolleg is a residential community, offering abundant opportunities for personal interactions and exchanges. The numerous conversations I had with colleagues over drinks in and around the Wissenschaftskolleg, discussing academia and life, were truly inspiring. Even chairing the talks at the Colloquia (I was exceptionally honoured to chair four of them) was a rewarding experience for me. Reading and listening to the stories of their scholarly

journeys and life experiences frequently took me beyond the boundaries of my own. From these interactions, deep mutual understanding and sympathies sometimes developed, leading to genuine friendships. This is the most valuable gift I took away from my ten-month stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Although our time there has passed like a fleeting dream, the precious bonds and memories remain.